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U.S. Softens Talk Of Use of Force To Free Hostages

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After a week of tough talk on the Iranian crisis, the White House yesterday tried to dampen speculation that President Carter is actively considering military action if another round of retaliation against Iran becomes necessary.

A senior administration official said such an impression could be counterproductive to efforts to win the release the 50 American hostages in Iran and could inject new "uncertainties" into the situation.

In response to questions, White House Press Secretary Jody Powell told reporters that while the president has not ruled out any option, it would be a mistake to assume that "even some form of non-violent military action will be our next step."

Powell stressed that the president has not yet exhausted all the political and economic sanctions available to him, and he did not rule out the possibility that the two sides may yet be able to resolve the hostage issue through "meaningful and productive discussions."

The presidential spokesman suggested that news reports — and not the tough talk of the president and other administration officials — were to blame for what he called a growing "general perception that the only options left to us in this process are military."

Earlier this week, Carter broke diplomatic relations and imposed other sanctions against Iran after Iranian leaders failed to deliver on what Carter said was a firm commitment to transfer control of the hostages from Moslem militants to the government.

In taking the action, the president warned that he would consider additional punitive measures unless the hostages are released promptly.

The same day a senior administration official, in a warning to American allies reluctant to support the sanctions, told reporters that if the president was forced to take additional action it could involve "considerable risks" for allied interests.

When reporters took those words as an implied threat of a naval blockade, administration officials did not discourage them from such an interpretation.

On Thursday there was more tough talk by Carter and his national security adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski, in separate speeches before the American Society of Newspaper Editors.

Carter told the group he did not regret past restraint in dealing with Iranian leaders, but vowed to pursue "every, and I mean every, legal use" of U.S. power to bring the hostages home. White House officials said military action is one of the options in that category.

In his remarks to the editors, Brzezinski said the administration will take whatever action is necessary to free the hostages — words that also sounded like an implied threat of military action.

"We do not deny ourselves the right to use any means to which we are entitled under international law," Brzezinski said. "I am weighing my words very carefully. I think you understand what I mean. We intend to obtain the release of our hostages."

Yesterday, Powell explained that Carter and Brzezinski were only trying to make it clear that military action has not been ruled out — not

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likely.

"That does not mean it would not be appropriate," Powell added.

The White House spokesman said Carter "has a pretty good idea of what steps" he is prepared to take if additional sanctions against Iran are required. However, he added, "that does not mean he has made a flat decision."

Powell did not object when one reporter remarked that he seemed to be trying to convey the impression that if there is another phase of retaliation, it is likely to involve more political and economic measures, and not military action.

In another development, Carter yesterday endorsed the use of journalists for secret intelligence operations in an interview with a group of newspaper editors invited to the White House.

According to a source who was at the meeting, the president said he shared the position of his CIA director, Stansfield Turner, who told an editors convention on Thursday that he will consider using reporters for intelligence work when the desired results cannot be obtained any other way.

When some editors expressed their heated opposition to Turner's position, the CIA chief said he did not understand why serving one's country should be thought to compromise one's freedom.